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SUBJECT: HARIRI ROUND 2: WHO STANDS WHERE, AND WHY

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons  
1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

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11. (C) Although Saad Hariri has, for the second time, won majority support as prime minister-designate, Lebanon's government formation process is expected to remain protracted as political tensions escalate. Hariri and the opposition have traded accusations of blame since the failure of the first round of cabinet formation negotiations. Although Hariri declared his commitment to forming a government that provides "the widest national participation" in his September 16 remarks, he is expected to move away from the 15-10-5 national unity formula discussed during the failed first round. Hariri's strategy for the road ahead is not yet clear, although the idea of a "technocratic" government as a means to break the stalemate has attracted attention. The ground has been shifting ever since Walid Jumblatt's decision in August to distance himself from the March 14 majority coalition, and a number of his fellow political leaders remain unsure where his true loyalties lie. In recent days, Hizballah officials have increased their defiant rhetoric, declaring readiness for war with Israel. Hizballah's desire to maintain its arms and its concerns over the Special Tribunal for Lebanon have led it to seek a direct or indirect blocking third in the 15-10-5 cabinet formula, and unified opposition demands point to an attempt to codify the 2008 Doha Agreement's "veto." The very nature of Lebanon's complicated political system, from the 1989 Ta'if Accord to the Doha Agreement, has produced an ongoing debate as to whether any effective government can come about without a renegotiation of the political rules of the game. At the same time, a slowdown in regional developments -- particularly with regard to Saudi-Syrian relations -- has unsettled Lebanese, who are quick to look outside for indicators of the direction of local politics. Given the rapid pace of recent developments, we are submitting an assessment of the current roles and possible motivations of the various key players, along with recommendations for our USG approach. End summary.

SAAD HARIRI: WHAT IS HIS STRATEGY FOR THE DAYS AHEAD?  
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12. (C) Saad Hariri, nominated for the second time on September 16 as prime minister-designate, has found himself challenged by outside forces and tough opponents after

starting cabinet formation negotiations from a position of strength based on winning 71 of 128 seats in the June 7 parliamentary election. His September 16 re-designation as PM-Designate reflects 73 votes from a total of 128 MPs (the 71 represent the March 14 coalition as well as the Armenian Tashnaq party). After making initial headway thanks to the pressure of his Saudi allies on the Syrians, Hariri hit a serious bump when his long-time ally Walid Jumblatt wavered on August 2. By mid-August, Hariri had ignited a war of words with the Free Patriotic Movement's Michel Aoun over the demand that Aoun's son-in-law Gebran Bassil be re-appointed as telecommunication minister, and the negotiations never restarted despite a fitful attempt in early September. Hariri's September 10 decision to resign as PM-designate after a fruitless eleven-week first round was not unexpected, as he and his advisors had noted several times a desire to "start from scratch" given the opposition's rejection of his initial cabinet proposal. Hariri has declared himself free of all commitments from the first round, adding that he will not "take a political stance against" those who had not supported him.

13. (C) Hariri's strategy thus far has been to highlight Aoun's intransigence as the obstacle, while focusing on the prime minister-designate's constitutional role. (Under the constitution, the PM-designate presents a cabinet proposal for the president's consent; there is no constitutional requirement that the opposition name its ministerial candidates.) Hariri has floated various trial balloons to gauge the opposition's response to new negotiating tactics. On September 16, during the course of the Ambassador's telephone call to congratulate Hariri on his re-designation, he

emphasized that he remains open to various approaches, including a national unity formula or a technocratic model. Hariri also referred to his commitment to "co-existence" while questioning the utility of going back to a proposal that had not worked (15-10-5). We expect that the PM-Designate will negotiate with Hizballah, Amal, and Aoun's FPM jointly as the opposition in this next round, rather than meeting with each party separately as has been the case for the past several weeks. Although some have urged him to propose a majority-only cabinet, most believe this would be a dangerous move, given Hizballah's strength. Hariri continues to identify Syria, Iran and Hizballah as the keys to the current obstruction, repeating this assertion in today's conversation.

14. (C) We assess that Hariri will continue to press the opposition hard as he returns to negotiations, as he -- and most other observers -- believe that Hizballah is unlikely to resort to street violence in the near-term. Although Hariri's tone has remained relatively statesmanlike, others on his team have taken increasingly strident tones in their frustration with the impasse. There is growing concern over Sunni-Shi'a polarization. Hariri has become increasingly irritated with President Michel Sleiman's consensus approach, believing the president's caution has emboldened the opposition. Meanwhile, even Hariri's closest advisors note that he and other majority leaders need to articulate more clearly why cabinet formation is worth the battle given widespread public disenchantment with the process. Although Hariri continues to display confidence and determination, we do not rule out the possibility that he may leave a way open to give up the effort altogether if the stalemate continues indefinitely, in order to allow another Sunni leader (designated by him) to pursue cabinet formation.

HARIRI'S MARCH 14 ALLIES: BICKERING BUT STILL WITH HIM  
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15. (C) Despite frequent internal March 14 complaints about Hariri's leadership style, his allies voted to re-appoint him this week as PM-designate, as expected. While Hariri has remained in close consultation with fellow March 14 leader Samir Geagea, both in person and via March 14 Secretary General Fares Souaid, his smaller allies regularly complain that he has made little effort to coordinate his strategy

with them. There has been friction with Kataeb leader Amine Gemayel over Kataeb's demands for two ministerial positions, and Kataeb temporarily withdrew from the March 14 secretariat for "technical" reasons, though it later rejoined. The Lebanese Forces, while projecting a unified front with Hariri, complain that the ministries Hariri offered them in the first round are not important enough. Smaller independents routinely threaten to bolt from the coalition if their various demands are not met.

16. (C) We anticipate that Hariri will continue to find it challenging to manage internal March 14 politics and to keep his allies "on message" with regard to a unified March 14 approach.

#### DRUZE LEADER JUMBLATT: WHERE'S WALID?

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17. (C) Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, once the most vocal member of the March 14 coalition, has realigned himself somewhere between the majority and opposition since his dramatic exit from the coalition in early August. Jumblatt has a long history of shifting political alliances and it appears that, unsettled by U.S. and Saudi openings to engagement with Syria, he has decided to run to the head of the line and reverse his opposition to the Syrian regime. In addition, Jumblatt himself has told us that May 2008's bloody clashes during Hizballah's invasion of Druze areas convinced him of the need to lower tension between the Shi'a and the Druze communities. Jumblatt is concerned that an Israeli-Iranian conflagration or a violent reaction by Hizballah to a decision against it by the Special Tribunal for Lebanon will lead to the Druze being assailed by the Shi'a. To accomplish his realignment, Jumblatt has tightened relations with the Shi'a Amal party, vocally criticized the U.S. and Israel, and called on his old ally Hariri to abandon sectarianism and form a national unity government. Jumblatt nonetheless supported Hariri's re-designation as PM on September 15.

18. (C) Jumblatt's shift will continue to complicate Hariri's government formation negotiations, as Hariri's current 71-member parliamentary bloc would be significantly weakened -- and perhaps pushed into the minority -- if a significant portion of Jumblatt's Democratic Gathering bloc split from the coalition. Most expect Jumblatt's concerns about Druze-Shi'a relations to continue to push him closer to the opposition.

#### HIZBALLAH: UNIFYING THE OPPOSITION

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19. (C) On September 15, the Hizballah, Amal and FPM parliamentary blocs informed President Sleiman that they would not support any prime ministerial candidate, thereby "abstaining" from the renomination of Saad Hariri. They also called for continued dialogue toward a national unity government and retention of the 15-10-5 formula. There are several theories regarding Hizballah's current obstructionism in the cabinet formation process. Most observers agree that Hizballah is in theory willing to participate in a government of national unity, primarily to obtain national support in any future Israeli assault against it. While Hizballah apparently pushed Aoun to accept the 15-10-5 cabinet formula in the initial round, its leadership reportedly decided not to press him further and thus did not stand in Aoun's way when he demanded the telecommunications portfolio for his son-in-law. Many, including Jumblatt, believe that Hizballah's primary short-term strategic goal is to derail the Special Tribunal for Lebanon since the party believes that it is the tribunal's prime target. Many majority figures assess that Hizballah is not dismayed by gridlock or ineffectiveness in the government because the absence of a state offers it space to operate. Meanwhile, the Ezzedine financial scandal, a pyramid scheme headed by a prominent Shi'a businessman close to Hizballah, has put the party on the defensive given the impact on investors in its Shi'a base.

¶10. (C) We assess that the current gridlock gives Hizballah the freedom to continue to strengthen its militia and to escalate its rhetoric. Hizballah will continue to seek indirect or direct veto power over all major GOL decisions, as well as seek to move any discussion of its arms out of a cabinet setting and into the National Dialogue process. The scuffle over the telecommunications ministry, although tied to many other issues, may also be related to Hizballah concerns that the ministry would cooperate with the Special Tribunal or foreign intelligence services if it reverts to Hariri's camp.

NABIH BERRI: TOEING THE HIZBALLAH LINE  
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¶11. (C) Nabih Berri, head of the opposition Shi'a party Amal, attempted to cast himself as a statesman and go-between during the first round of cabinet negotiations. However, his announcement that he would not re-nominate Hariri as PM-designate is viewed as a direct reaction to Saad's statements that he would give the opposition "the same treatment he was receiving." Berri has appeared to be coordinating his policies increasingly with Jumblatt, although this is a sign of Jumblatt's shift rather than of Berri's move away from Hizballah. Relations between Amal and its Christian ally, Aoun's FPM, have not been good since the heated electoral competition between the two in Jezzine in the June election, but Hizballah remains the glue that bonds them together. Berri's relative media silence during the Ramadan period has been interpreted locally as a sign of Syrian stasis.

¶12. (C) We expect that Berri will continue to toe the Hizballah line. His September 15 refusal to support the re-nomination of Hariri is viewed as a confirmation of unity within the opposition after months of speculation that he and Jumblatt would ally to form a new political center. Berri will likely play the good cop to Aoun's bad cop while Hizballah coordinates overall strategic policy.

THE CHRISTIAN OPPOSITION: MICHEL AOUN  
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¶13. (C) Aoun, long known as stubborn and individualistic, has turned his failed negotiation with Hariri into a feud. The aggrieved FPM believes that Hariri targeted it instead of Amal and Hizballah in the negotiations because he doesn't respect the Christians, who are divided politically and have no significant militias. While Aoun has not been pushed to compromise by his allies, he sees himself as an independent force with independent claims. The FPM believes that Hariri wants to strip it of the valuable ministry of telecommunications for financial and perhaps security reasons, and they show no inclination of negotiating. While the FPM does not monolithically support Gebran Bassil's candidacy, there is little appetite in the party for yielding to what is viewed as Hariri's high-handedness. Based on conversations with FPM leaders, it increasingly appears that the party is committed to restructuring constitutional practices -- such as creating a cabinet veto for the minority -- as part of its strategic alliance with Hizballah.

¶14. (C) We assess that Aoun is convinced that Hariri never negotiated with him in good faith and feels that he has already compromised enough. His intransigence will be supported by his opposition allies and may be used by them for greater strategic goals.

PRESIDENT SLEIMAN -- CAUTION AND CONSENSUS  
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¶15. (C) President Sleiman, selected by the Syrians as Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) chief of staff, was a consensus candidate for the presidency following the 2008 Doha agreement. Throughout cabinet formation negotiations, he has sought to maintain his neutral, consensus-promoting role and urged Hariri repeatedly to negotiate with the opposition

instead of demanding that they take or leave his cabinet proposal. The president views himself as the president of all Lebanese, not just of the Christians, and he is insistent that all confessions be accommodated in a unity government. Sleiman appears focused even now on his "legacy," avoiding taking stands in the current cabinet crisis that would impact the remainder of his five-year term. Although he has called the various political blocs together for meetings at Baabda, Sleiman's critics urge a more activist approach.

¶16. (C) We believe that as the former head of the LAF, the President will do anything in his power to avoid violence in the streets. Sleiman has frustrated Hariri through his attempts to push him to address the opposition's demands, but his caution may play a vital role in tempering Hariri's approach.

COMMENT AND SUGGESTED USG APPROACH

¶17. (C) We agree with our interlocutors' predictions of continuing deadlock in the near term as well as rising tensions. Lebanon's current political system and confessional balance do not permit excluding one or another group from power. Throughout Lebanon's history, power has only been redistributed, even temporarily, following violent shocks to the system such as the 1977-1990 civil war and the May 2008 Hizballah action. Most of our interlocutors note that concessions to the opposition -- even painful ones -- may well be the only path to maintaining stability.

¶18. (C) We believe that our continued role should be to underscore our opposition to outside interference in Lebanese internal politics, including making clear to Damascus that its support for Hizballah and others obstructing the political process has a cost. We also intend to continue to highlight our ongoing support for the institutions of the Lebanese state, including the army, police and judiciary. High-level visits and telephone calls to moderate leaders will continue to underscore our commitment to a strong and independent Lebanon and a cabinet formation that reflects the June electoral outcome. Meanwhile, our public messaging should remain focused on the USG's desire to see the cabinet formation impasse resolved as soon as possible in a manner that respects the process outlined in the Lebanese constitution.

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